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ABSTRACT

Some errors in adult black students' writing cannot be analyzed merely within the traditional hierarchy of grammatical rules; a look at sociological factors is germane to an evaluation of students' writing ability or inability. Data for an analysis of black adult students' writing at the syntactic level have shown that problems of clarity might be related to language structure and use in the students' speech community. Samples of students' writing were taken from essays obtained at an urban community college, and considering the cultural dimensions of a writer's background proved helpful in determining the reasons for certain lexical choices. To facilitate the analysis, a general topic and a variable from each sentence were extricated (since they were manifestations of ideas which were expressed through the written word, the topic and variables were usually found together). Researchers hoped to determine (1) whether specific issues were evident in the writers' samples, and (2) if so, whether these sociolinguistic variables were apt to influence these issues. This has proved to be the case insofar as the samples in this study were concerned, thus supporting the view that studies of language cannot be carried out in a "narrowly defined view of grammar." (Sample sentences and their extensive analysis are included.) (AEW)

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An Analysis of Students' Writing

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Introduction

The topic of Black speech and Black speech communities has occupied the research interests of many analysts during the past two decades. These studies have focused on historical (Stewart, 1970; Dillard, 1972), ethnographic (Abrahams, 1963; Kochman, 1970 and 1983; Smitherman, 1977), structural (Wolfram, 1969, Labov, 1972), and public policy (Smitherman - Donaldson, 1987) accounts of the above community. From these research interests have also emanated strategies and suggestions for improving the language skills of students who bring a different linguistic system to classrooms, especially those that are urban-centered. The claim is that the ability to utilize the language of the broader society is a mechanism for Black social and economic mobility, and many language practitioners, both Black and White, support this position.

In many instances, however, these research accounts (Shuy, 1965; Labov, 1970) have been aimed at the speech patterns and remedial mechanisms of Black children. The assumption is that corrective and remedial methods are more productive at this stage of cognitive and linguistic development than at a later stage of implementation.

Regarding the adult Black who also brings a different linguistic variety from mainstream norms to the classroom different issues are evident. For one thing, as researchers have shown Bernstein, 1960; Turner, G. and G. Pickvance, 1971;

Bowles and Gintis, 1973), there is a strong correlation between social class and language behavior. Consequently, these variables tend to reinforce each other. Second as Shuy (1965) and others have agreed, language must be viewed in relationship to the demands of an individual's speech community. By community, we mean a sense of sharing certain cultural factors, whether conscious or unconscious, on the students' part. Furthermore, a community is tied together by such features as age, income, orientation, work experience, and world view. Third, the social and psychological structure of the family shapes communication and language. Thus, for a teacher of language skills, he/she needs to consider the foregoing variables as possible influences on language production, in this case, on the writing samples of the adult Black student writer.

Recently, the writer has been examining Black adult students' writing at the syntactic level, and I has deduced that problems of clarity might be related to language structure and use in the students' speech community. For a large number of community college enrollees of which this study is directed, data of student profiles would support the definition of a community in that there are common variables which the adult Black students share.

Data

Data for this analysis consist of samples of students' writing taken from essays obtained at an urban community college, where this writer has been teaching for several years.

For this presentation, however, the writer used a few samples of students' writing during the 1985 summer session. Only the germane portions of a sentence will be used to support the writer's argument. Also, the choice of sentences as the unit of inquiry is not a way to assess writing. Rather, the inclusion of sentences suggests manageable units, as opposed to full-length essays, from which factors, other than grammatical ones, can be deduced. Put another way one can define the linguistic description of sentences as one component of something larger. Precedents of this analytic approach have been established in linguistics (Pike, 1967), anthropology (Gumperz and Hymes, 1972), psychology (Miller, Galanter and Pribram, 1960).

It is true that the context of the sentences chosen for this analysis of Black adult writing could explain the message conveyed by the sentences. However, the focus is on a larger cognitive and cultural framework which may be a central factor in the type of writing samples seen in adult Black writers. For example, in an essay where the writer was asked to persuade an individual to listen to her favorite radio station, this sentence was noted:

> "They don't play hip hop music because it's a station to mellow out on."

From this sample, aspects of lexical choice "hip hop...mellow.." seem to be the grammatical features that need to be addressed. However, if we consider the cultural dimensions of the writer's background, perhaps these factors may tell us more of the reasons for these lexical choices. The writer, a Black female of

a lower economic class, is attempting to convey meaning beyond the totality of linguistic units (i.e. subject, verb, or agent and object). The message is that a particular musical type "hip hop" and the effects "mellow out" are culturally determined. Thus, according to Agar (1975):

> To understand what is happening, then, a lexicon explaining the meaning of works is inadequate. Also needed is a broader knowledge of the events of which the sentences are a partial realization.

On the sentence above, culturally significant variables influence the type of sentence produced by the writer.

To this writer, the statement that "students write the way that they talk" is a plausible one; however, this observation in itself does not account for the consistency with which students write sentences which we have labelled as grammatically unclear or improper. Furthermore, what the writer believes is taking place is that the students' writing is shaped by sociolinguistic factors such as those cited above. Let us demonstrate this position with samples of students' sentences.

S1 Mark and Carmen will do drugs with each other.

S2 A rape victim should not carry a child if she feels she did not want the child to be by the rapist.

S3 Its (sic) time those people paid their own way when I came up we worked and paid our own way through college.

S4 Black families are struggling just to keep a household going by paying mortgages, rents, bills and etc.

S5 ...the schedule fit (sic) my day much better.

S6 Do 13-year-old boys and girls know what they are doing sexually or do they go through the motions?

S7 Are you really ready for a heavy scene with your parents?

Discussion

In each of these sentences, the writing teacher will find something that hinders clarity of expression. To facilitate the analysis, a general topic and the variable from each sentence were extricated. In the writer's opinion, the topic and variables are usually found with each other since they are manifestations of ideas which are expressed through the written word. In other words, are there specific issues evident in the writer's samples? If so, are these specific sociolinguistic variables which influence these issues? This writer believes that this is indeed the case insofar as these samples of Black adult writing are concerned. Schematically, this analysis is depicted as follows.

	SENTENCE	TOPIC	VARIABLES
S1	Mark and Carmen will do with each other.	Drug/Involvement	Share Experience
S2	A rape victim should not carry a child if she feels she did not want the child to be by the rapist.	Rape/Sexual Trauma	Sex
S3	Its (sic) time those people paid their own way when I came up we worked and paid our own way through college.	Independence	World View
S4	Black families are struggling just to keep by paying mortgages, rents, bills and etc.	Socio-economic Situation	Experience

	SENTENCE	TOPIC	VARIABLES
S5	The schedule fit (sic) my date much better.	Work/Experience	Lifestyles
S6	Do 13-year-old boys and girls know what they are doing sexually or do they go through the motions?	Sexual Maturity	Age/Sex
S7	Are you really ready for a a heavy scene with your parents?	Adolescence	Independence

If the topics and the variables identified above appear to be loose and broad, it is that it is sometimes difficult to capture these facets of the analysis as narrow categories or ideas. For example, in S1 the terms of "Drug/Involvement" under the topic heading suggest that the writer may have used drugs, been a part of the group without using drugs, or may be offering his (dis)pleasure with those persons who use drugs. Thus, to capture any of these situations, the writer uses the broad topic of "Drug/Involvement." Further analysis of S1 reveals that the expression "do drugs" is the syntactic issue in question. Of course, the teacher could advise the student that he/she could select another word(s) to express this idea and improve upon the meaning of the sentence. On the other hand, and at a deeper level of analysis, this author believes that the factors of the writer's experience and perhaps the drug users' age are sociolinguistic factors which play a role in the written product.

In S2 one could argue that the sentence is not clear because of verbosity on the student's part (i.e., "she didn't

want the child to be by the rapist"). However, since rape is a topic of much concern to females, primarily, then the variable of sex is a factor which influences the student's writing. After all, emotions enter into the use of written language, as well as the spoken variety, and this sentence, in the writer's opinion, supports this contention.

In analyzing S3, the chief concern seems to be lexical choice "paid their own way" and "I came up." Once we go beyond these surface manifestations of language, we will discover that this student, an adult female enrollee, evokes a sense of independence and her sense of the world. In other words, if one is to pursue an education, much of the responsibility should be undertaken by the individual. It is considered wholesome and proper to exercise an element of independence in the world, insofar as the writer saw it.

As in S4, the chief factor which contributes to nebulous meaning is the choice of the lexical items - "struggling" and "keep a household going." In looking for other factors than grammatical ones, these seem obvious if the teacher takes time to know his/her students. The data, in this instance, reveal that a large percentage of students attending this institution are of a lower socio-economic background. It is not surprising then that the topic and variable in question have some direct relationship to the writing produced by the student.

In examining S5 and its concomitant sociolinguistic variables, one finds that a large number of enrollees in a two-year institution attend school on a part-time basis. As in this

student's case, the topic of "work/education" and the variables of "lifestyle" would have to be taken into account in looking for extraneous variables which shape the student's writing. A schedule which is in keeping with occupational and work responsibilities must be taken into account when one is involved in educational activities, as we believe this writer is suggesting.

An examination of S6 reveals that clarity of meaning is attributed to the expression "go through the motions." As we have done in the examples so far, we identify a topic as "sexual maturity" and an accompanying variable, "age and/or sex." In this essay, the writer, an adult female, expresses her views on the subject of sexual activity on the part of teenagers. As a mother of teenagers herself, one can conclude from the sentence that the writer is against teenagers becoming sexually active in terms of the physical and mental trauma that are likely to ensue as she further pointed out in her paper. Thus, as we mentioned in S2, the sentence produced has a relationship to the topic being written about and the variable which is usually associated with it.

The focus on S7 needs a sense of context. In this essay, the students were asked to write an essay on the advantages of obtaining one's apartment. The writer, in presenting his view on the advantages of having his apartment, seems to express his position in the phrase "ready for a heavy scene." If we remove this statement from the realm of slang and colloquial expression, the writer believes that the student is trying to reinforce the topic of "confrontation" and the variable of "adoles-

cence." In other words, one runs the risk of parental confrontation as long as he/she lives at home with his/her parents. The expression "ready for a heavy scene" suggests a more mature conflict between adults. The writer, we believe, would rather have his apartment than engage his parents in domestic conflict.

Thus far, we have examined a few sentences which suggest that the topics central to a student's writing and a variable usually in close association with the topic are forces which shape the student's written product. But are there any other forms of data which we can harness to support the claim of extraneous variables shaping students' writing? Let us look at an on-going activity which is included in the conduct of classes and which, in the author's view, is pertinent to this discussion.

In classes, the writer allows students to engage in open dialog for about five to ten minutes per session. Students are free to raise any issue they choose, and they state a position on that topic. These topics will cover a range of issues such as education, ethnicity, political events, religion, and world events portrayed through the television and print media. Invariably, certain paradigms unfold. For example, the veterans in class raise topics pertaining to the military; females (a large percentage of whom are Black) engage in topics pertaining to Black male-female relationships; new enrollees point out problems at the college and so on. But what is this activity telling us?

Topics of this type is an indirect mode of expressing

ideas on the student's part. And writing is just one avenue of expressing ideas. Put another way, the Black adult writer brings to the classroom topics and issues which are a part of their world view. Thus, if we find a common theme and certain variables (ie., race, sex, occupation, geographic living patterns), it is safe to conclude that there is some relationship between this phenomenon and the written product turned in to the teacher by the student.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to advance the claim that some errors in adult Black students' writing cannot be analyzed merely within the traditional hierachy of rules for writing (i.e., subject-verb lack of agreement, non-parallel structure, comma splice, fragments, and so on). This writer shares the view espoused by Labov (1972), who states that studies of language cannot be carried out in a "narrowly defined view of grammar." Rather, a look at sociological factors is germane to an evaluation of students' writing ability or inability in their guest for meaning.

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